

## Church Membership #2

Matthew 18:15-20

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:15-20, ESV)

If you remember from last week’s sermon, I read Matthew 18:15-18 and told you that my intention was to address the issue of “church membership—is it important?” You’ll also remember that I didn’t get past verse 15. The reason so many Christians have a low view of membership in the local church is because they never get past verse 15 either.

Let me remind you what we talked about from verse 15 and then I’ll explain why stopping there might affect your understanding of and relationship to the local church.

The supposition is that you (a person) feel that you have been sinned against by another person. We learn in verse 15 the steps to take: a) think through whether the person is a brother or not; b) think through whether the offense is actually “sin” or simply a difference of opinion; c) if you honestly believe that you’ve been sinned against by a person, Jesus says, “go and tell him his fault, between him and you alone,”—in other words, don’t gossip about it, address it; d) if he listens (has regard for what you are telling him, assuming you are right, and repents), you have gained/won your brother.

Keep in mind that the goal of this confrontation is always reconciliation and restoration of the relationship. That’s why Jesus doesn’t stop after the word “won,” but rather says, “you’ve won your brother.” If this happens, praise God! This, obviously, is the best-case scenario.

On the other hand, what happens if your brother won’t listen? Jesus tells us here, but I want to point out that every step after verse 15 presumes a covenantal relationship between a person and a particular church. In other words, the process supposes membership in a local body. Besides looking at the rest of this process and the role of the church in it, I want to take some time toward the end to consider why “the church” and why “membership.”

Notice step #2—“If he does not listen (regard what you say), take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses (verse 16).

Everyone familiar with this passage knows that after personal confrontation, we should “take two or three.” Have you ever wondered why? It is not, at least according to this text, because they were witnesses to the sin, but so they can be witnesses to the confrontation. Most commentators agree that Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 19:15. Why would Jesus emphasize that witnesses be present for the confrontation? If restoration and reconciliation are the goals and you are unwilling to listen to a genuine grievance from another brother or sister, the community is fractured.

With the mandate of “two or three,” there are at least a few things going on here. (1) Their presence protects both the accuser and the accused. After the meeting, neither will be able to misrepresent the meeting or what was said. (2) They are able to encourage either repentance (if the accusation is true) or encourage restoration if there is simply a misunderstanding. (3) It also provides the Old Testament standard with regard to “documentation” of what has gone on. Why is “documentation” important?

Because of what Jesus says in verses 17-18: *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

If the person is still obstinate, the next step is to “tell it to the church.” What is “the church” and why would Jesus grant it such authority?

What is the church? Evangelicals have historically seen the “visible” church to be a local body of Christians defined by three marks: (1) The preaching of God’s Word; (2) the administration of the sacraments instituted by Jesus—baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and (3) church discipline.

Why these three? For the answer, you’ve got to go back to the whole Old Testament and consider the three offices woven throughout.

The first office is that of *prophet*. The role of the prophet was to communicate God’s will, both to believers and unbelievers. He was to call them to repentance, but also to encourage them with God’s grace.

The second office is that of *priest*. The priest was a person having the authority or power to perform and administer religious rites, and in particular, rites of sacrifice and atonement. Specifically, sons from the tribe of Levi offered sacrifices on behalf of God's people with the hope that He would hear and forgive their sins. In short, he is a mediator.

The last office was that of *king*. The role of the king was to rule according to God's law and to defend his people from their enemies.

As we move on to the New Testament, we see the culmination and fulfillment of all three of these offices in the person of Jesus. Let me read to you three questions from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*:

24. *How does Christ execute the office of a prophet?*

Christ executes the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by His word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.

25. *How does Christ execute the office of a priest?*

Christ executes the office of a priest, in His once offering up of Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.

26. *How does Christ execute the office of a king?*

Christ executes the office of a king, in subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all His and our enemies.

Having fulfilled these roles, the logical question is/was, "What happens when He's no longer with us?" The answer is that He has turned over the ongoing work of each of these offices to the church. This is why He says "whatever you bind will be bound..."

Remember the marks of the church I spoke of earlier? They correlate to the offices of Christ.

Jesus was/is our prophet preaching to us the will of God for our salvation. In the church, this task has been assigned to those called and ordained to the task of preaching and teaching.

Jesus was/is our priest having offered himself up as a perfect offering for our sins. In the church, we experience, by the Holy Spirit's presence, the priesthood of Jesus through His sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Here, through common elements, the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to our hearts.

Finally, Jesus is our king. In the church, we experience His kingship through the authority given to those called to lead it—namely elders. Their responsibility, on behalf of Jesus, is to "rule" the church. They lead it and in the words of the PCA's Book of Order, diligently seek the fruit of the preached word.

This brings us back to verse 18 of our text. Jesus says, once the sin has been brought to the church (leadership), if the person refuses to listen he is to be treated like a "Gentile or tax-collector." In other words, the church leadership has the authority and responsibility to excommunicate the person who refuses to repent of community-wrecking sin.

The implication of having the responsibility to excommunicate the unrepentant is that they are also responsible for the inclusion and reception of new and repentant members into the community.

The New Testament is full of commands to believers in Jesus to "obey your leaders," just as there are numerous commands to leaders to "shepherd the flock."

The bottom line is that without some formal commitment at a local level (the particular church), obedience to these commands by either congregation members or leaders would be impossible.

Added to this, the final step in this process would be moot. In other words, if you're not a member of a church, the church has no oversight where you are concerned. Theologically speaking, you're unprotected. This is because, if you fall into some type of sin, the church has no recourse, no ground to stand on, and no tools to effect your restoration. Remember, that is the goal.

It would probably take me 6-7 hours to give this topic the attention it deserves. Fortunately, we'll be taking 6-7 hours on September 22 to do exactly that! I'd encourage you, if you're not a member (either a new non-member or an "old" non-member) to sign up for the class as I've redesigned it. It doesn't obligate you, but it is necessary in order to join, if that is your desire.

<sup>1</sup> A better word here than "listen" would probably be something like "disregard." For example, "If your brother *disregards* what you've told him..."

<sup>2</sup> "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established." (Deuteronomy 19:15 ESV)

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." (Hebrews 13:17 ESV)

<sup>4</sup> "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,\* not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;\* not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." (1Peter 5:1-3 ESV)